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(For information on purchasing the Recovery Plan call 1-800-582-3421.)

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WOLVES in the NORTHERN ROCKIES

COMMONLY ASKED QUESTIONS

NATIONAL WILDLIFE FEDERATION

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INTRODUCTION

The National Wildlife Federation has worked long and hard for the protection of threatened and endangered species. In 1973, wolves in the Rockies were listed as an endangered species under the federal Endangered Species Act because they had been eradicated in the region. The Federation strongly believes that wolves should be recovered in portions of their former range and that the Rocky Mountain Wolf Recovery Plan adopted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1987 provides a starting point for this recovery effort. The reintroduction of wolves into Yellowstone Park is an important part of the recovery program. The National Park Service should, however, prepare an environmental impact statement prior to reintroduction so that the public can participate in the development of Yellowstone's wolf management program. NWF recognizes that wolf recovery efforts and wolf management will evolve as more is learned about wolves in the northern Rockies. In this context, NWF welcomes ideas from conservationists on how wolf recovery can best be achieved.

NWF believes that it is important to emphasize that recovered wolf populations can and should be managed, just as we manage other wildlife species. Maintaining healthy big-game populations and quality hunting are important established goals in the states affected by the wolf recovery plan. Wolf management must reflect these and other objectives. With sound management programs wolves will add a valuable dimension to both wildlife populations and hunting in the West.

Our thinking about wolves has changed significantly over the years. Wolves once roamed over most of North America, but vigorous control programs undertaken by both private livestock operators and the government led to their virtual extermination in the lower 48 states by the 1930's (Fig. 1). In recent decades, however, we have come to recognize that large predators, such as wolves, play an important role in healthy ecosystems and have values that cannot be measured in dollars.

Currently, wolves are listed as an endangered species under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA) throughout the United States, except in Alaska and Minnesota. In Minnesota, wolves inhabit the northern one-third of the state and are listed as a threatened species under the ESA. In Alaska, healthy wolf populations are found throughout the state and federal protection is unnecessary.

WOLF RANGE

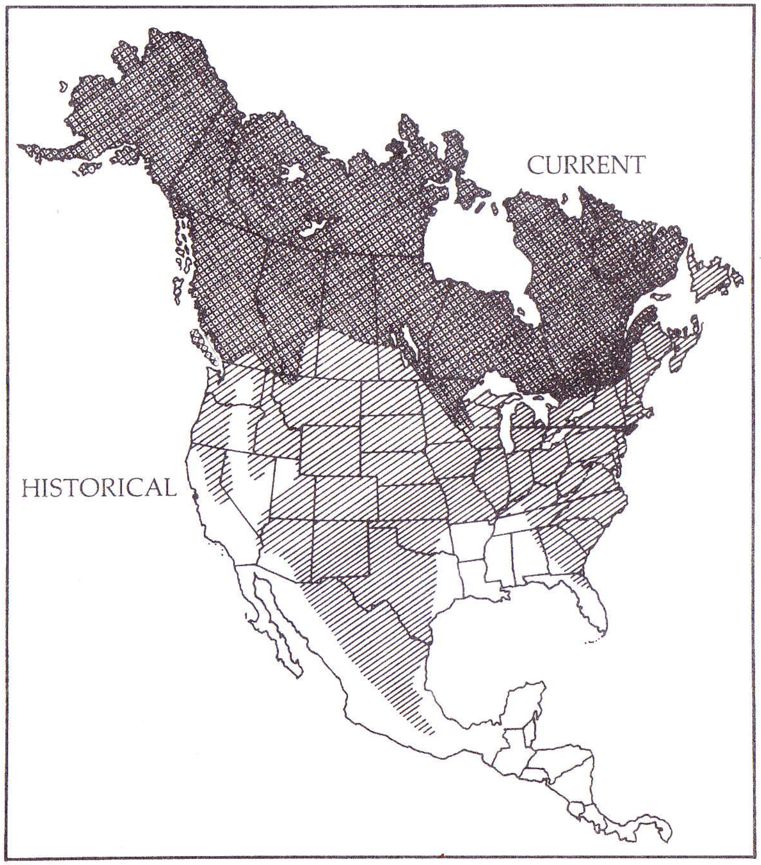


Figure 1

Under the 1987 Rocky Mountain Wolf Recovery Plan, three areas have been identified that can support viable wolf populations (Fig. 2). The core of the Northwestern Montana Recovery Area is Glacier National Park and the Bob Marshall Wilderness Area. The Greater Yellowstone area includes Yellowstone National Park and portions of the surrounding national forest lands. The Selway-Bitterroot

WOLF RECOVERY AREAS

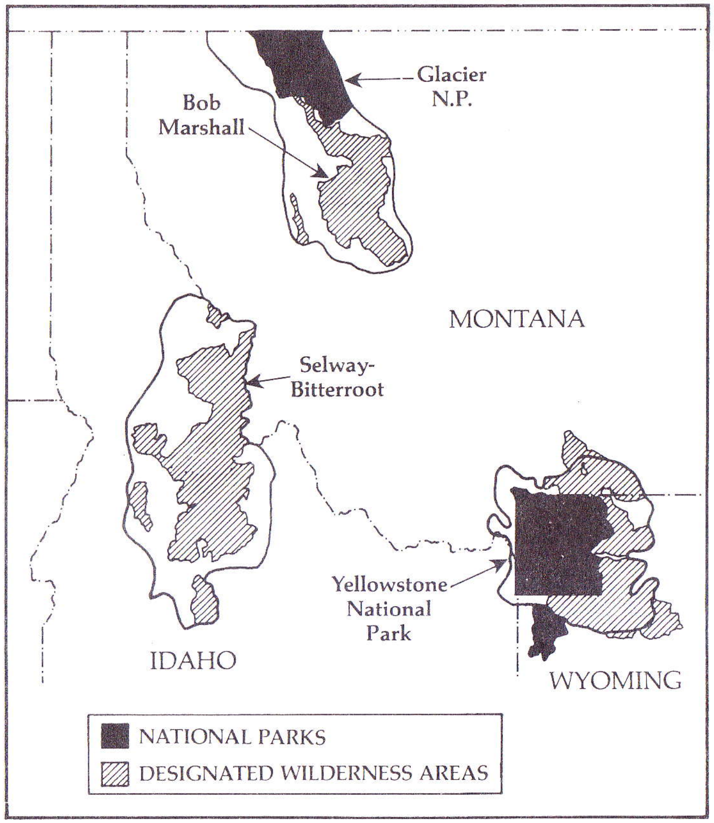


Figure 2

and River of No Return Wilderness areas, along with other federal land, comprise the Central Idaho Recovery Area.

The Recovery Plan calls for establishment of 10 breeding pairs of wolves in each of these three areas for a period of three years. When these goals are reached, wolves will be delisted (taken off the federal endangered species list) in Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming. Recovery will proceed by natural dispersal in Northwestern Montana and Central Idaho. Due to its isolation from other wolf populations, reintroduction is needed for Yellowstone.

The following pages contain questions that are frequently asked about wolf recovery in the Rockies.

BIOLOGY

1. How many wolves are in a pack?

In Minnesota, packs feeding primarily on deer number between 2 and 5. In the Canadian Rockies, packs that feed mostly on elk number between 5 and 15. Wolf packs in the northern Rockies will fall within these size limits.

2. How many wolves will there be when the recovery goal of 10 breeding pairs is reached?

Wolves usually live in packs that consist of one breeding pair, their pups of the year, and the pups' older brothers and sisters. 10 breeding pairs refers to 10 packs, or an estimated 75 to 150 wolves.

3. How often does a pack of wolves make a kill?

A wolf needs 5 to 12 pounds of meat per day throughout the year. Consumption is usually higher in the winter because prey is more easily captured then, and small packs generally consume more per wolf than do large packs.

How often a pack kills depends on the size of the pack, the hunting prowess of the pack, the size of the prey species they are hunting predominantly, the availability of carrion, and the density and condition of prey animals. Studies of wolf packs preying primarily on deer and elk determined that packs killed 1 big game animal every 2 to 8 days during the winter. This averaged out to 1 prey animal per wolf every 23 days.

4. If wolves were not controlled in the Rockies, what would happen to big-game populations?

Wolf/prey interactions have been studied in many places. The effect unmanaged wolves have on prey populations depends on the number and variety of prey species in the area, weather conditions, the kinds of habitat changes taking place, and the effects of other predators, including man. At this time, there is little evidence that wolves are solely responsible for prey declines when no other factors are involved.

Unmanaged wolves, coupled with hard weather or heavy human harvests, can lead to prey declines. For example, moose populations crashed near Fairbanks, Alaska in the 1970's when human harvests of moose tripled.

Since big game is harvested heavily in many areas in the Rockies, and since big game is not allowed to move freely throughout its native range, *unmanaged* wolf populations could cause enough additional mortality to some big-game populations to cause them to decline.

5. What impact have wolves had on game in Minnesota?

In northeastern Minnesota, a combination of wolves, a deteriorating habitat base, and severe winter weather caused declines in deer populations between 1968 and 1980. The deer herd in northeastern Minnesota is currently stable or increasing, while wolf populations remain stable. This is probably due to a series of mild winters that have favored the deer's ability to escape from wolves. In other parts of Minnesota, where deer habitat has remained good, deer numbers are at high levels despite the presence of wolves.

Even with wolves, moose populations have increased in northeastern Minnesota throughout the deer decline because the habitat changes taking place are advantageous for them.

6. What keeps wolf numbers from increasing indefinitely?

Food availability restricts wolf numbers. A limited food supply can be caused by weather conditions or other factors favoring the prey, as well as by low prey populations. Whatever the cause, decreases in food availability result in wolf starvation, less frequent breeding by females, fewer pups per litter, and survival of fewer pups.

Wolf populations also are limited by available territory. Packs require large territories (50 to 1000 sq. miles, depending on pack size and prey density) and often kill wolves that intrude into their territories.

In addition, diseases such as distemper and parvovirus take heavy tolls on wolf populations. In Minnesota it is estimated that nearly half of the pups die of disease every year. Rabies is rarely reported in wolves and was never reported in Wyoming or Montana.

7. Do wolves eat small animals?

Yes, but they obtain the majority of their food from large mammals such as deer, moose and elk.

8. Do wolves kill more than they can eat? Are they cruel?

It is difficult and dangerous for wolves to kill large animals. Because of this, they often eat every scrap, including bones and hooves. If conditions make hunting easier (for example, when crusted snow supports the wolf but not the prey), they may become more selective in what they consume and leave the less palatable parts of the animal such as the hooves and hide. Occasionally, the opportunity arises for wolves to kill several animals at once. In that event, large amounts of the prey may be left unconsumed. Wolves often revisit these sites later and clean up anything that other scavengers have not already eaten.

The wolf's reputation for "cruelty" come from its inability to always make a swift kill. The flailing hooves of an elk or deer can easily break a wolf's bones. A broken jaw means death for a wolf. For this reason, it is not unusual for wolves to wound formidable prey such as moose or elk and then retreat to a safe distance until the animal weakens from loss of blood and is safer to kill.

Wolves also may begin feeding before the prey is dead. Kills are often days apart, so hunger and competition with other pack members cause them to start feeding immediately. "Cruelty" is an attribute humans give to the natural condition of predation. A wolf is no more "cruel" than a songbird picking apart an insect.

9. Do wolves kill only animals that are sick or weak?

Wolves kill animals that are the easiest for them to capture. Young animals and old animals are heavily preyed upon, as are diseased or deformed animals. However, wolves are capable of killing healthy adult animals, and do so if the opportunity arises.

10. Are wolf and prey populations "naturally balanced" at some constant number in an ecosystem unaltered by man?

No. It is natural for predator and prey numbers to fluctuate. Sometimes the predator is favored and prey populations decline; sometimes the prey is favored and then their numbers increase.

11. What effect would wolves have on bighorn sheep in the recovery areas?

Studies in Canada and Alaska show that populations of wild healthy sheep which are located near rocky steep terrain are not heavily impacted by wolves. Sheep that are weakened by disease or parasites or that have been transplanted into areas where they were not found historically and which are not near escape terrain may be vulnerable. Management provisions can be developed to protect these populations should wolf predation cause significant declines.

12. What effect would wolves have on grizzly bears and coyotes in the Rockies?

Grizzly bears observed in Canada and Alaska were able to take possession of wolf kills in most cases. As a result, wolves may help grizzlies by providing a source of easily obtained meat. On the other hand, wolves occasionally prey on bear cubs and harass bears when they are encountered in the pack's territory. There is no evidence that wolves impact grizzly populations one way or the other.

Coyotes are killed and harassed by wolves. It is expected that coyotes would become less numerous in wolf pack territories.

THE RECOVERY PROCESS AND THE ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT (ESA)

1. How many wolves are there in Montana, Idaho and Wyoming?

Wolves were essentially gone from the U. S. Rockies by the 1930's, the victims of poisoning and trapping. In a 25-year period at the turn of the century, more than 80,000 wolves were killed in Montana alone. Since that time, wolf sightings have been reported each year, and a few wolves have been killed in the three-state region. Most of these animals are thought to be young animals from Canadian populations that are searching for territory and mates or wolves that have escaped from captivity.

In 1984 a pack of wolves began using the northwestern part of Glacier National Park, MT. In 1986 they denned in the Park. This was the first documentation of denning in the U. S. Rockies in 50 years. This pack, containing 8 to 10 wolves, continues to straddle the U.S./Canadian border. At present, it is the only well established pack in Montana; however, there is evidence of several single wolves and pairs in other areas. There are no wolves in the Yellowstone area, and while central Idaho has a few wolves, there is no evidence that they are successfully breeding. All together, 30-60 wolves currently reside in the Rockies.

2. Have there been any problems with wolves since the recovery plan was signed?

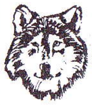
Yes, there have been several instances where wolves have preyed on livestock. In each case, federal officials either killed or relocated the wolves, and a wolf compensation fund reimbursed livestock producers for their losses. Also, poaching is a problem; at least 5 wolves are known to have been illegally killed since 1987.

3. The wolf is currently listed as "endangered" in the Rockies and as "threatened" in Minnesota. What do these terms mean?

The ESA defines an endangered species as any species which is in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range. A threatened species is defined as one which is likely to become an endangered species within the foreseeable future throughout all or a significant portion of its range. The ESA provides federal monies and protection so that listed species can be recovered to the point where they can be taken off the list. Under the law, it is illegal to kill or harass endangered species, except under certain circumstances. For threatened plants or animals, the Secretary of the Interior is allowed greater management flexibility and can write regulations governing the taking of threatened species.

The Wolf Recovery Plan calls for delisting (removal of the wolf from the federal list of endangered and threatened species) when 10 breeding pairs exist for three successive years in all three recovery areas. Before this occurs, the Plan has a provision for changing the listing to threatened in a recovery area as soon as an area has 10 breeding pairs for three years.

In addition, if wolves reach recovery levels (10 breeding pairs) in one recovery area before recovery levels are reached in the other two areas, consideration will be given to listing wolves in the area where they have recovered as "threatened under similarity of appearance." In this event, trapping and hunting seasons could be opened on wolves in the area, but federal regulations involving trade or export of these animals would still apply.



4. If there must be 10 breeding pairs in each area before the wolf is delisted in the northern Rockies, isn't it possible that wolves may reach higher than desired levels in one area before the other two areas are recovered?

If no general hunting and trapping was allowed until all three areas had 10 breeding pairs, this could become a problem. To avoid this possibility, wolves from the high population area could be translocated to low population areas. Also, listing the population as threatened under similarity of appearance would allow population control in an area with more than 10 breeding pairs.

5. State wildlife agencies have voiced objections to the Wolf Recovery Plan. What are their primary concerns?

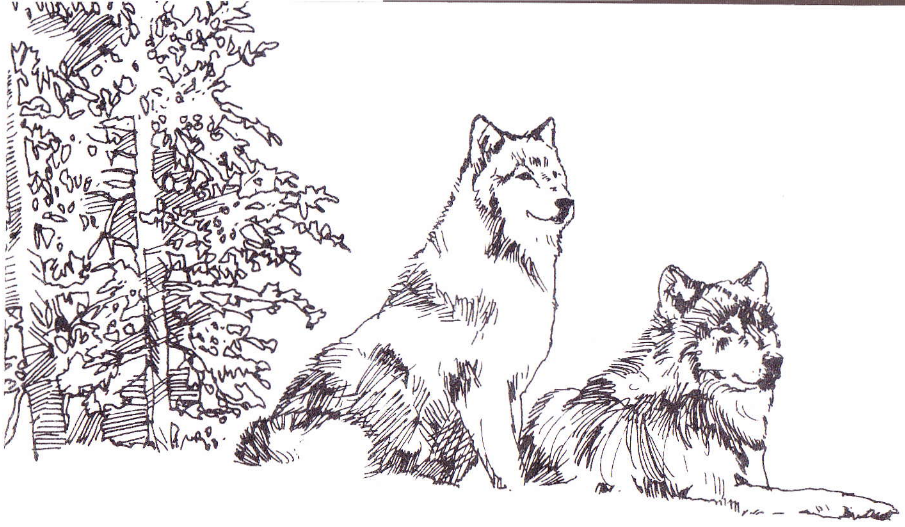
First, they are concerned that the wolf will not be delisted in a timely fashion. Second, they want assured federal funding for research and management while the wolf is listed. Finally, the states are concerned that the ESA does not allow enough flexibility for wolf control should problems arise while the wolf is listed.

6. What if the states refuse to participate in wolf recovery?

Wolf recovery, including the Yellowstone reintroduction, technically could take place without cooperation from the states, but management would be less efficient and more costly.

7. Why is the wolf still listed as threatened in Minnesota when there are more than 1,500 of them there?

The Eastern Timber Wolf Recovery Plan calls for two viable populations of wolves in the lower 48 states. A viable population exists in Minnesota and nowhere else. Recovery plans are revised every 5 years. While some groups and agencies have requested delisting, the Recovery Team apparently believes that it would be too risky to delist wolves in Minnesota until another stable population exists elsewhere.



8. Since there are healthy wolf populations in Canada and Alaska, why are they listed as an endangered species in the U.S. Rockies?

While wolves are found in many locations in the northern hemisphere, they have been exterminated across vast portions of their former range (Fig. 1). The intent of the ESA is not solely to maintain wildlife populations in a few discrete locations. The Act also requires restoring populations where such restoration is possible and speaks to the protection of the ecosystems upon which they depend. The objective of the Act is to recover species to the point where they can be removed from the list. With only 30 to 60 wolves inhabiting the U.S. Rockies at this time, the wolf certainly qualifies as an endangered species under the ESA.

9. According to the Recovery Plan, wolves in Yellowstone can be reintroduced as an "experimental nonessential population." What does this mean?

In 1982, the ESA was amended to permit special management regulations to be written for listed species that are reintroduced to their historic range. Such populations are designated as experimental and nonessential to the survival of the species. Under this amendment, managers could draft regulations giving state wildlife agencies management authority, and allowing more flexibility in management such as allowing ranchers to kill depredating wolves outside National Park boundaries. These special regulations would be established during the process of writing an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) on reintroduction.

10. What is the current political status of wolf reintroduction to Yellowstone?

The 1987 Recovery Plan recommends that an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) be completed on wolf reintroduction. Political pressure from western congressmen kept the National Park Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service from beginning an EIS. But in 1991, the U.S. Congress directed these agencies to complete a draft EIS by mid-1993 and appropriated money for them to do so.

An interdisciplinary EIS Team has been formed to begin the process. The first step in producing the draft EIS will be to hold public meetings to hear people's concerns. Next, the Team will select a list of alternatives ranging from no reintroduction to reintroduction under full protection of the Endangered Species Act. The Team will then analyze each alternative as to its possible impacts on wolves, livestock, other wildlilfe, etc., select a preferred alternative based on these findings, and release a draft EIS.

At this point, the public and other agencies will have the opportunity to comment on the document and propose changes.

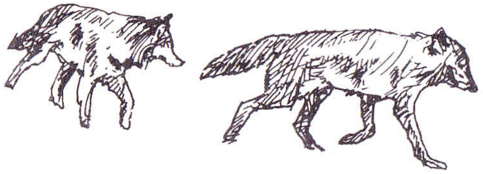
11. What is the basis for establishing 10 breeding pairs (packs) as a recovered population in an area?

Biologists believe that 10 breeding pairs represent the minimum number of wolves necessary to maintain a population in an area. A population must be large enough to sustain minimal numbers of animals through disease episodes and other adverse factors. At least 3 areas with 10 breeding pairs would be required to prevent short-term genetic problems.

12. The Recovery Plan describes "wolf managment zones." What does this mean?

The Recovery Plan calls for the establishment of three management zones in each wolf recovery area to guide management decision-making. In "Management Zone I," wolf recovery would be the primary objective and control would be very limited until recovery was reached. "Management Zone II" would be a buffer zone where wolves were allowed, but where wolf recovery would be balanced with livestock grazing and other land uses. Problem wolves could be controlled. In "Management Zone III," wolves would not be a primary management consideration and could be controlled (lethally or otherwise).

While the Recovery Plan outlines a zone approach for wolf management, the Plan does not identify where zones will be located within the wolf recovery areas. The Recovery Team believed this task could best be accomplished by state and federal agencies using detailed habitat information.



WOLF MANAGEMENT

1. Since deer and elk have co-existed with wolves for thousands of years without human interference, why would we need to manage wolves?

Although it is rare for wolves to eliminate a species in an area, wolves can, in conjunction with other factors such as a series of hard winters, reduce a prey population to low levels. Once this happens, wolf populations also will decline. At this point, low numbers of prey and low wolf populations are left, and it may take many years for populations of either to increase. In our fragmented ecosystems, well-planned management programs are necessary to ensure the maintenance of healthy prey and predator populations.

2. How can elk and deer be managed to provide adequate numbers for hunters and wolves?

As hunters have long known, big-game populations can be increased by protecting and purchasing winter range and through a variety of management tools such as selected road closures and controlled burning. These measures will be needed to protect and enhance big-game populations in the future either with or without wolves.

3. Could wolf populations be managed once they were reestablished? Will government control programs be required?

Wolves can be managed. For example, during a 43-day period in 1987, six wolves out of a population of 25 to 30 were killed by big-game hunters just north of Glacier National Park in Canada. Improvements in traps and rifles, more efficient methods of transportation, and increased access to wild areas make wolf management easier than it was at the turn of the century. Government control would be necessary for livestock depredation problems, but trapping and hunting seasons should keep wolf populations at desired levels.

4. Who would be responsible for wolf management while the wolf is listed? After delisting?

As long as the wolf is listed as an endangered or threatened species, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, in cooperation with the state wildlife agencies, is responsible for managing wolves. After the wolf is delisted, state wildlife agencies will assume responsibility for managing wolves as furbearers or big-game animals.

5. Can wolves be controlled while they are listed as endangered or threatened?

The ESA provides for the control (relocation or killing) of wolves that kill livestock. For example, five wolves were killed by government hunters on the Blackfoot Reservation in Montana in 1987 because of livestock depredation problems. It is also permissible under the ESA to control wolves if they threaten their own food base. If wolves congregate in an area and cause undue pressure on a prey population, they can be relocated to other places within that recovery area.

6. Will wolves stay within Yellowstone National Park? What will be done if they don't?

There is a high probability that at least some of the reintroduced wolves will leave the Park. Wolves can be fitted with a recapture collar at the time of their release. If the animal leaves a designated area, a drug within the collar can be released by a remote transmitter. The immobilized animal can then be easily recaptured. Because wolves often travel large distances when they leave their natal pack, it is expected that some of the offspring of reintroduced wolves will end up in inappropriate areas. These wolves would be removed in accordance with management plans developed during the EIS process. There are of course large areas of public lands outside the Park where wolves are appropriate. Wolves in these areas would be left alone.

7. Could special interest groups prevent the opening of hunting and trapping seasons on wolves after they were delisted?

Both state and federal courts have held that the states have the authority to manage all game and non-game wildlife not protected by federal law. Assuming the states follow their regular procedures in establishig a wolf hunting or trapping season, there would be no legal grounds for challenging such a season.

HOW WILL WOLVES AFFECT ME?

1. Are wolves a threat to human safety?

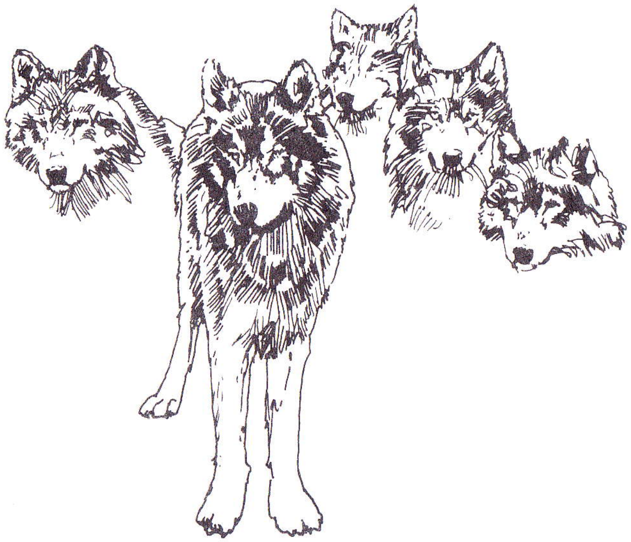
There has never been a documented death caused by a wild non-rabid wolf in North America. By contrast, 11 North Americans were killed by domestic dogs between May, 1985 and September, 1986. Wolves are shy and avoid contact with humans whenever possible.

2. Is livestock depredation expected to be a major problem? Will there be a compensation program?

Wolves prefer natural prey to livestock. Where such prey is available, problems have been minor. In Minnesota, where 1,500 wolves live in proximity to 234,000 cows and 91,000 sheep, about 70 cows (0.03 percent) and 100 sheep (0.11 percent) are claimed to be wolf-killed annually. In British Columbia and Alberta only one of every 1000 available livestock (0.1 percent) is killed yearly. It is reasonable to expect that the percentage of cattle and sheep killed by wolves in the Northern U.S. Rockies would fall somewhere within these figures. Because most wolves do not prey on livestock, control can be targeted at offending individuals rather than at the entire population.

While the overall livestock depredation rate is expected to be negligible, some individual operators may suffer the bulk of the problems. This is the case in other areas such as Minnesota, where less than 1% of the farms report problems with wolves. Sometimes chronic losses are due to poor husbandry practices, but ranches with clean operations may also have continuing problems.

A compensation program has been proposed for ranchers whose livestock are killed by wolves. This program would be funded through private donations and administered by state and federal agencies. The compensation program would complement an effective control program—not replace it. Compensation would reduce the economic risk for the individual livestock producer, and could reduce opposition on the part of some to wolf recovery.



3. Are hunters and nonhunters adversaries on the wolf issue?

In northwestern Montana, hunters surveyed in the area currently inhabited by wolves responded by a three-to-one margin that they hoped wolves would continue to live there. A similar majority thought that wolves should be allowed to expand to other areas. Non-hunters shared similar views. The common goal of wanting wolves is the important thing to keep in mind as other issues involving wolves are debated.

It is important for hunters to realize that nonhunters have legitimate concerns and interests in how wildlife is managed. At the same time, nonhunters should understand that the majority of hunters do not want the wolf exterminated. Hunters may want the number of wolves reduced at some times and in some places if they are contributing to the decline of game populations. This is very different from wanting wolves eliminated.

Everyone interested in wolf recovery must realize that the survival of the wolf in the Rockies depends upon cooperation between many groups with varying interests.

4. Will fur-trapping or big-game hunting restrictions be necessary during wolf recovery?

State wildlife agencies are responsible for setting seasons on trapping and hunting. The state would limit seasons only if it was in the best interests of the resource.

There should be no need for restrictions on fur-trappers during wolf recovery. A wolf caught incidentally would have to be reported and turned over to the authorities. Trapping has not been altered in Minnesota to protect wolves, and the Rocky Mountain Wolf Recovery Plan does not suggest that trapping be modified here.

Due to the large prey base in Yellowstone, it is unlikely that 10 breeding pairs or less would cause impacts that would necessitate hunting restrictions. In some places in the Northwestern Montana and Central Idaho Recovery Areas, big game is heavily harvested. If wolves moved into areas where human hunting was harvesting these populations close to their maximum annual production, adjustments in regulations could be necessary. As hunters know, state fish and wildlife agencies regularly adjust seasons now in response to changing conditions.

5. Will wolf recovery necessitate closing areas to recreation, timber cutting or other commercial activities?

Wolf recovery is dependent on sustaining healthy populations of native prey and limiting poaching. Activities that do not affect the prey or increase poaching opportunities will not affect wolves. In Minnesota and Wisconsin it has been found that wolves do not survive in areas with more than 1 mile of road per square mile of land. Much of the land in the proposed wolf recovery areas already has plans in place that protect deer and elk habitat and limit road densities to less than 1 mile per square mile for grizzly bear recovery. Thus, there should be little biological need for restrictions. One exception to this is that human activities should be limited in the spring near any dens that are in use.

Some people fear that wolves will be "used" to stop activities on federal lands even if it is not biologically necessary. However, if reintroduced wolves are designated a nonessential experimental population in Yellowstone, the sections of the Endangered Species Act that legally mandate habitat protection will not apply on Forest Service or Bureau of Land Management lands.

6. Are wolves needed in Yellowstone? Will I be able to see them?

Wolves were a natural part of Yellowstone's ecosystem. Our national parks were established to provide places where natural processes could continue unaltered by humans. The unhunted elk and bison populations are at high levels within the Park; some biologists argue that wolves are needed to regulate these populations to restore a more natural balance between elk and bison and their range. Wolves certainly are needed in the sense that the Yellowstone is not complete without them.

No one knows just how visible wolves will be in Yellowstone. In open areas with large game populations, they may be observable through binoculars. Large numbers of visitors certainly will hear their howling.

7. How can I be involved in decisions regarding the wolf in the Rockies?

Become informed on the issue. Talk with and write to decision-makers such as the Secretary of the Interior, the directors of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and National Park Service, and your representatives and senators.

Become a participant in the process of writing an Environmental Impact Statement on wolf reintroduction by writing to:

USFWS
Box 25486
Denver, CO 80225

Ask them to place your name on the mailing list to receive scoping and draft EIS documents on Yellowstone wolf reintroduction.

The National Wildlife Federation will periodically send information to persons interested in the progress of wolf recovery and how their interest regarding wolves can best be heard. To be placed on the mailing list, write:

National Wildlife Federation
Northern Rockies Natural Resource Center
240 N. Higgins #2
Missoula, MT 59802